

# The Teaching Pyramid

## A Model for Supporting Social Competence and Preventing Challenging Behavior in Young Children

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**M**any early educators report feeling ill equipped to meet the needs of children with challenging behavior and frustrated in their attempts to develop safe and nurturing classroom environments. These teachers spend much of their time addressing the behaviors of a few children, leaving little time to support the development and learning of the other children.

Increasing evidence suggests that an effective approach to addressing problem behavior is the adoption of a model that focuses on promoting social-emotional development, providing support for children's appropriate behavior, and preventing challenging behavior (Sugai et al. 2000). In this article we describe a framework for addressing the social and emotional development and challenging behavior of young children. This pyramid framework includes four levels of practice to address the needs of all children, including children with persistent challenging behavior (see "Teaching Pyramid"). The following example demonstrates how to implement this model in a preschool classroom.

**Emma, a preschool teacher of two- and three-year-olds, takes time to greet every child and parent on arrival. She talks to the child briefly about the upcoming day or events at home. Emma is committed to building a nurturing and supportive relationship with every child in her class [Level 1].**

**The classroom is carefully arranged to promote children's engagement and social interaction. When children have difficulty, Emma first examines the environment to make sure that the**

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problems are not due to classroom arrangement or the structure of an activity [Level 2].

A few children in the class seem to need instruction on playing with peers, coping with anger and disappointment, and using social problem solving. Emma uses a curriculum that includes strategies and activities for teaching specific social skills, and she is confident

that this helps those children make progress [Level 3].

Although most of the children are doing quite well in her classroom, Emma worries about her ability to meet the needs of one child who often screams and hits the other children. With the help of the director, Emma contacts the child's home and begins working with the family to develop an individualized behavior support plan that can be implemented at home and in the classroom [Level 4].

### **Building positive relationships**

The foundation of an effective early education program must be positive, supportive relationships between teachers and children as well as with families and other professionals (Bredekamp & Copple 1997; Joseph & Strain in press). Good relationships are key to effective teaching and guidance in social, emotional, and behavioral development. Simply put, there are two reasons why early childhood educators need to invest time and attention in getting to know children.

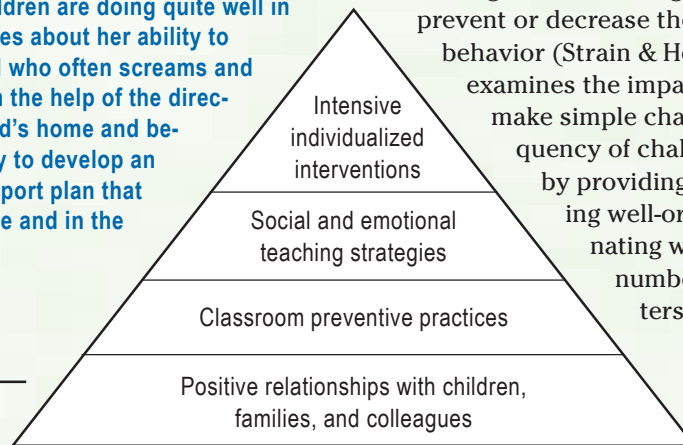
First, as adults build positive relationships with children, their potential influence on children's behavior grows significantly—that is, children notice responsive, caring adults. Children pay particular attention to what such a teacher says and does, and they seek out ways to ensure even more positive attention from the teacher.

Second, in the context of supportive relationships, children develop positive self-concept, confidence, and a sense of safety that help reduce the occurrence of challenging behavior. As such, the time spent building a strong relationship is probably less than the time required to implement more elaborate and time-consuming strategies.

### **Implementing classroom preventive practices**

The critical importance of the classroom environment, including adult-child interaction, is well established in early education (Dodge & Colker 2002). Many early childhood educators are aware of the relationship of classroom design to challenging behavior. They use classroom preventive practices, including specific adult-child interactions and classroom design, to support development and use of appropriate behavior.

The combination of giving children positive attention for their prosocial behavior, teaching them about routines and expectations, and making changes in the physical environment, schedule, and materials may encourage children's engagement in daily activities and prevent or decrease the likelihood of challenging behavior (Strain & Hemmeter 1997). A teacher who examines the impact of the environment may make simple changes that reduce the frequency of challenging behavior (for example, by providing children with choices, creating well-organized learning centers, eliminating wide-open spaces, limiting the number of children in learning centers, and so on).



### **The Teaching Pyramid**

**A model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behavior in young children**

### **Using social and emotional teaching strategies**

Many children need explicit instruction to ensure they develop competence in emotional literacy, anger and impulse control, interpersonal problem solving, and friendship skills (Webster-Stratton 1999). Key emotional literacy skills

include being able to identify feelings in self and others and act upon feelings in appropriate ways.

Discriminating among emotions such as anger, sadness, frustration, and happiness requires a vocabulary of feeling words. Young children can be taught new and complex feeling words directly through pairing

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## Practical Strategies for Building Positive Relationships

- Play, following the child's lead.
- Have families complete interest surveys about their child.
- Greet every child at the door by name.
- Have a conversation over snack.
- Conduct home visits several times a year.
- Listen to a child's ideas and stories and be an appreciative audience.
- Send home positive notes.
- Offer praise and encouragement.
- Share information about yourself, and find something in common with the child.
- Ask children to bring in family photos, and give them an opportunity to share them with you and their peers.
- Post children's work at their eye level.
- Have a Star of the Week who brings in special things from home and gets to share them during circle time. Make sure everyone has a turn.
- Acknowledge children's efforts.
- Give compliments liberally.
- In front of a child, call the family to say what a great day she or he is having.
- Find out what a child's favorite book is and read it to the whole class.
- Let the children make personal "All about Me" books, and share them at circle time.
- Write on a T-shirt all the special things about a given child and let him or her wear it around.
- Play a game with a child.
- Play outside with a child on the playground equipment.
- Ride the bus with a child.
- Go to an extracurricular activity with the child.
- Learn some of the key phrases in each child's home language.
- Give hugs, high-fives, and a thumbs-up for accomplishing tasks.
- Hold a child's hand.
- Call aside a child who has had a bad day and say, "I'm sorry we had a bad day today. I know tomorrow is going to be better!"
- Tell children how much they were missed when they are absent for a day of school.

**Key emotional literacy skills include being able to identify feelings in self and others and act upon feelings in appropriate ways.**

pictures of emotional expressions with the feeling word and reading children's literature featuring feeling words. Playing games provides practice, as in Feeling Face Bingo, in which children find the picture of an emotion on a bingo card that matches the emotion named by the game leader. Children also learn when family and teachers label the children's emotions as well as their own throughout the day. Over time, children will match feeling words with their physiological sensations and the emotions of others.

Controlling anger and impulse includes being able to recognize anger, understand that anger can interfere with problem solving, and use strategies to calm down instead of acting out. Problem solving includes recognizing when a problem exists, generating multiple alternative solutions, evaluating the consequences of solutions, acting on a solution, and then evaluating how effective the solution was. Friendship skills include sharing and turn taking, making suggestions in play, requesting and receiving help, giving compliments, and dealing effectively with common peer problems such as teasing or bullying.

As in all areas of instruction, effective teaching in this domain requires careful planning, individualization, provision of many and diverse learning opportunities throughout the day, and attention to children when they are engaged in socially competent behavior such as following directions, helping their friends, participating in dramatic play with peers, and sharing.

### Planning intensive individualized interventions

Even when teachers establish positive relationships, implement classroom preventive practices, and use explicit teaching strategies, a few children are likely to continue to display challenging behavior. In the last decade, research has demonstrated that *positive behavior*



support (PBS) is a highly effective intervention approach for addressing severe and persistent challenging behavior.

As an approach for addressing a child's problem behavior, PBS is based on research and humanistic values. It offers a method for identifying the environmental events, circumstances, and interactions that trigger problem behavior, the purpose of problem behavior, and the development of support strategies for preventing problem behavior and teaching new skills (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing 2002). The focus of PBS is to help the child develop new social and communication skills, enhance relationships with peers and adults, and experience an improved quality of life.

Intensive individualized interventions are planned and implemented by a team for application in home, early education, and community environments. The team includes classroom staff, the child's family, and other professionals who may be supporting the teacher, child, or family (for example, mental health consultant or social worker). Once established, the team completes a functional assessment (a process of observing the child in key situations, reviewing the child's records, interviewing caregivers and teachers, and analyzing the collected information) to identify the factors related to the child's challenging behavior.

The functional assessment leads to the development of a behavior support plan that includes prevention strategies, techniques for teaching new skills, and

changes in responses to the challenging behavior. The team implements the plan at home and in the classroom and monitors changes in the problem behavior and the development of social skills and other child outcomes.

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## A systemic approach

The teaching pyramid represents a hierarchy of strategies. Implementing successive levels solves more of the social and behavioral problems experienced in classroom settings. Providing a warm and responsive environment in which teachers work hard to build positive relationships with all children can prevent many problem behaviors and provides the foundation for the next levels of the pyramid (see the model "Teaching Pyramid"). To support other children's meaningful participation in daily routines and activities, teachers may need to put in place classroom preventive practices involving more structure and feedback. A few children may need a well-planned, focused, and intensive approach to learning emotional literacy, controlling anger and impulse, interpersonal problem solving, and friendship skills.

When the three lower levels of the pyramid are in place, only about four percent of the children in a classroom or program will require more intensive support (Sugai et al. 2000). The key implication here is that most solutions to challenging behaviors are likely to be found by examining adult behavior and overall classroom practice, not by singling out individual children for specialized intervention. This is good news for teachers who are eager to provide all children with a high-quality early education experience.

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